

Introduction

I.1 Who Is This Book For?

The book is aimed at any professionals who are involved in the teaching of English grammar to learners, whether they be

- writers of descriptions of grammar for learners or teachers;
- syllabus designers of courses with a grammatical basis;
- writers of materials which focus on grammar;
- trainers of language teachers on courses where an awareness of grammar is important;
- individual teachers who are interested in grammar.
- to anyone else who is involved in grammar, e.g. testers and researchers

It is concerned principally with English, but many of the insights will apply to other languages.

I.2 Why Another Book on Grammar?

Grammar is a vast enterprise. There are several hundred books with the word ‘grammar’ in their title, and many others involve grammar without stating it explicitly. They range from the scientific grammars of, for example, Quirk et al. (1985), to the more pedagogically oriented reference grammars, such as the *Cambridge Grammar of English* (Carter and McCarthy 2006) or the *Collins Cobuild English Grammar* (2017), or to the more practical grammars such as Swan’s *Practical English Usage* (Swan 2016); from the explanatory grammars for teachers, for example, Yule (1998), to coursebooks for students of the language at university level, e.g. Greenbaum and Nelson (2009); from practice grammars for learners, such as Murphy’s *English Grammar in Use* (Murphy 2004), to coursebooks for language learners designed around a grammar syllabus.

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So why another book? Because in this enterprise I have tried to do something different. All of the above books have some relevance here but none cast their net so wide; they focus on certain aspects horizontally, such as grammatical description or practice activities. Here I have attempted a ‘vertical’ integration of many separate areas; I have tried to ‘join up the dots’. This makes the book unique, I believe.

I.3 Aims

The aim of this book is to link advances in our knowledge of grammar, from both theoretical and descriptive viewpoints, with developments in pedagogical practices, both inside and outside the classroom; in short, to connect up the whole process of grammar, vertically, as it were, from top to bottom. The book attempts to show that there is (or should be) a link between researchers in their ivory towers and the various kinds of practitioners – a link that is too often missing. As a result of this, many pedagogical practices that are popular with teachers, such as rules of thumb, or certain types of exercise (such as gap-filling), have a weak theoretical basis. However, the subtitle *Theory, Description and Practice* makes no assumption of the priority of one element over others. It is not simply a case of ‘here is the theory, here are the pure scientific facts, now deal with it’. Pedagogy can, in this model, well be the instigator of scientific activity, though this is not often enough the case.

There is much that is problematic in the world of grammar and grammar teaching. By looking at it from every angle the book attempts to be critical of the status quo, but at the same time to offer solutions to all concerned. The second part of the book contains four case studies of certain important areas of English grammar in which the insights of the earlier chapters are applied, whether to arrive at new understanding and descriptions or rules of thumb.

References

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1 *The Place of Grammar*

1.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to lay a foundation for the rest of the book by questioning the relevance of grammar, in particular as it applies to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It investigates how grammar is viewed by the various groups of people who are involved with it in some way: L1 speakers and L2 learners, linguists and applied linguists, researchers, grammarians, syllabus and textbook writers, and, above all, teachers. Given the controversial status of grammar among some of these, the central question is this: What is its place in teaching? Is it useless, as some researchers and educators in the past have claimed, or useful in a number of possible ways for both learners and teachers? If it is useful, then how? The arguments of educators and research findings from second language acquisition (SLA) studies will be examined critically. The chapter will conclude with a brief consideration of one area where the place of grammar has never really been in doubt: teacher language awareness.

1.2 Attitudes to Grammar

‘Grammar’ is a word that evokes different reactions in different groups of people. For linguists it refers to a particular area of linguistic study: an area which comprises a combination of syntax and (inflectional) morphology. This would be the end of the story were grammar merely the province of experts, as is largely the case with major concepts in other academic or scientific fields. For example, jurisprudence is the province of the legal profession, surgery the fiefdom of the medical profession. But grammar is unlike these; there are several constituencies that claim an interest, even expertise, in it. Everyone, it seems, has something to say about grammar (and a different conception of it).

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For speakers who regard English as their first language, grammar is something of a hot potato. Debates about it are inevitably connected to the idea of correctness, as some forms are unjustly stigmatised, leading some speakers to become nervous about their usage. Issues such as the splitting of infinitives (see the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive grammar in Section 2.6.2) can become a battleground. Whenever L1 speakers ask what I do and I reply that I write books on English grammar, I am met with one of two reactions: a statement along the lines of ‘good, we need more of that’ from those who are confident in their usage on such matters, or a shifty look that says ‘I’d better be careful’ from those who aren’t. The subsequent reaction, when I tell them that I am only concerned with learners of English, whose problems with English grammar and ‘correctness’ are immensely more extensive than theirs, is either disappointment or relief.

The main constituency of interest here is of course teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). For them grammar evokes a number of attitudes and reactions. In this there are two major sub-constituencies, namely those who regard English as their first language and those who do not (a distinction which is gradually being eroded nowadays). For both groups there is one major determinant: the experience of grammar they themselves have gone through as language learners and trainees. These experiences may produce different attitudes.

To take the first group of teachers, L1 speakers are unlikely to have encountered formal grammar to any great extent in school or university (even if they are English graduates). Those with some form of TEFL qualification will have undergone a limited course in grammar, largely pedagogic in nature (see Section 2.6.3). And despite the increased professionalism of the EFL industry, there are still many parts of the world where teachers are recruited ‘off the street’ purely as a result of their ‘native-speaker’ status, and who will have to learn about grammar ‘on the hoof’, if at all.

As a result, such teachers may feel somewhat uncomfortable dealing with grammar in the classroom. And their experience of learning other foreign languages at school may also have put them off grammar, especially if they were taught in a highly formal manner. Nevertheless, they should possess confidence in their pronouncements on the grammaticality of learner utterances (based on their ‘primary grammar’ – see Section 2.6.1), even though they may not be able to explain their judgements, if asked.

In comparison, L2 teachers may have more traditional attitudes to grammar in the classroom, in particular if they themselves learnt or studied English in a traditional way. For them, grammar can be seen as

an indispensable part of learning a language (Berry 2001). Moreover, explicit grammar teaching may serve as a crutch to rely on if they are unsure of their own proficiency in the language. On the other hand, some may see grammar as a distraction from, or even a substitute for, the real task of learning a language. The majority would appear to be somewhere in between these two attitudes, thinking of grammar and its associated terminology as a way of structuring their syllabus or as a tool to help them in making generalisations. (See the example of this from Tsui 1995 in Section 4.8.) Again, it partly depends on their previous experiences.

Another reason why they may be hesitant to tackle grammar on a general level is that, lacking the level of intuition of L1 teachers, they may have doubts about their ability to make pronouncements about the grammaticality of their learners' utterances. At the other extreme they may – based on incorrect rules of thumb or misleading terminology – even reject perfectly grammatical utterances; Maule (1988) gives an example of a teacher who rejected a perfectly formed sentence because it did not correspond to the three-conditional pattern that she had been indoctrinated with.

EFL learners usually encounter grammar most prominently as a selection of simple, isolated rules of thumb, which they may or may not be able to utilise in real-time language production, followed by exercises in which they are supposed to apply these rules. (See the distinction between convention and creativity in Section 2.4, as well as the deductive/explicit options in Section 1.3.) However, should they proceed to study English as a subject at university on English Studies programmes they will be faced with an extensive and bewildering, albeit systematic, set of grammatical concepts, rules and tendencies – not to mention the associated terminology – which may or may not assist in their learning of the language (this not being the aim).¹

We should also make mention here of grammarians of various hues: scientific grammarians who write massive authoritative descriptive tomes stretching nowadays to 2,000 pages (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985), and pedagogic grammarians such as Michael Swan (2016) who attempt to make sense of this vast data for teachers and learners. (For an examination of the difference between scientific and pedagogic grammar, see Section 2.6.3.)

Other constituencies may be cited, for example EFL textbook writers (for whom grammar may still be the best organising principle for their syllabus), as well as language-test designers and language-acquisition researchers (who are interested in the role of formal instruction). This last group is considered in Sections 1.4 and 1.5.

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1.3 Grammar in Methods and Approaches

The role of grammar teaching has for many years been highly controversial in EFL pedagogy. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, different methods rose and fell with sometimes bewildering regularity; methods which were largely defined by their attitude to grammar – whether it should be taught, and if so how. To understand the differences and similarities between these methods, it will be helpful to consider three distinctions that underlie the various approaches to grammar.

- (a) **Deductive vs inductive.** This distinction applies to teaching and thought in general. It basically concerns whether the direction of instruction is from the general to the specific (deductive) or vice versa (inductive). As regards grammar teaching, the deductive approach involves the presentation of a rule or explanation followed by examples or practice; in contrast, induction involves activities leading up to the formulation of the rule, either by the teacher or by the learners themselves; the latter may involve some guidance from the teacher.
- (b) **Implicit vs explicit.** This involves whether learners are made aware of the grammatical point (explicit) or not (implicit). An implicit approach, while still involving grammar at some level, does not bring the grammatical point into focus. It is perfectly possible, for example, for such a point to be ‘hidden’ in a text and for a lesson to proceed without comment about it. On the other hand, both deductive and inductive approaches are necessarily explicit; the grammatical point is obvious to learners.
- (c) **Proactive vs reactive.** Again, both deduction and induction are inevitably proactive approaches in that the grammar is preordained, regardless of how it is arrived at. In a reactive approach, however, the grammatical point is not predetermined; it may be anything that arises in the course of a lesson which the teacher chooses to deal with (e.g. a difficult structure in a text or a learner question). Clearly this approach has serious implications for teachers; they need to be knowledgeable about and confident with grammar in order to be able to handle the unexpected.

All of these distinctions assume the role of grammar in some shape or form. But of course we must allow for the absence of any form of grammar. Thus we need to mention a fourth distinction:

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- (d) **Experiential vs studial.** (Howatt [1984] uses the terms ‘natural’ and ‘rationalist’; I prefer the former terms since the latter are used in other contexts.) This distinction refers to whether a language is learnt intuitively as part of the learner’s life experience or whether it is taught in a formal situation involving some form of declarative knowledge. This is similar to the explicit/implicit distinction above but it is not the same; an implicit approach may well be reliant on grammar in some way, while an experiential one could not be. In essence, the question is: Should L2 learning be like L1 learning or not? Educators have long remarked on the total success achieved in L1 learning compared to the very varied success rate in L2 learning. This observation has given rise to a number of so-called natural approaches, which claim to reflect L1 learning as much as possible. However, there are two obstacles to this attempt at imitation. The first is the ‘unnatural’ situation where learning takes place: the classroom with the assistance of a teacher. The second is the fact that learners already possess at least one language before embarking on an L2. The issue is whether the L1 facilitates L2 learning or hinders it. The answer to this question has altered over the years; nowadays the facilitation option seems to have the upper hand. Of course, it is not only grammar that may be affected in this way; other areas of language may be as well. Equally, it is not true to say that L1 learning proceeds without any formal instruction; parents do correct their children’s grammar (and are often ignored).

Three other factors in evaluating methods and approaches are:

- whether they stress writing or speech as paramount;
- whether they believe that comprehension precedes production or that the two proceed in unison;
- whether the use of the learners’ L1 is permitted; clearly if it is then explanations can be more frequent and elaborate.

With this ‘toolkit’ in place, we can evaluate some of the distinctive methods and approaches that have been cogently articulated by educators over the last fifty years or so (even if in the actual execution they were less than ‘pure’). All are studial to some extent (despite what their proponents might claim), and all are proactive unless otherwise stated (see Richards and Rogers 2014 for a full account).

The much-maligned **Grammar-Translation Method** was supremely explicit and deductive: rules were presented, paradigms memorised,

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and then applied; explicit knowledge of grammar was deemed to be a legitimate aim, as was the concentration on the written form at a time when opportunities for oral communication were limited; this condition still obtains in some parts of the world. Instruction was carried out in the L1 and practice consisted mainly of translating texts from the L1 into the L2.

The variously termed **Oral/Situational/Structural Method** (see Richards 2015: 63–65) also has an explicit, deductive focus. It is sometimes called PPP methodology since it consists of three stages: presentation, practice and performance. This is still to be found underlying many courses today. It differs from grammar-translation in that it stresses oral production, particularly in the performance stage, where opportunities to apply the point creatively are offered. Nevertheless, it is highly grammatical; lessons are structured around a highly explicit point; it is principally deductive (though guided induction could be used).

The **Direct Method**, largely a reaction to Grammar-Translation, is as a result inductive and implicit, at least in theory. In addition, it rejects the use of the L1 in class and stresses oral skills first of all. Nevertheless, it partly retains a role for grammar in that lessons are built around grammatical points that are exemplified by picture, pointing or demonstration ('I am writing on the blackboard').

The **Audiolingual Method**, based on a now-unpopular behaviourist view of learning, is also (theoretically) implicit and inductive; learners are not made aware of the point they are learning. However, the repetitive automatic exercises they are required to carry out in order to achieve fluency in speech – often in language laboratories – have a clearly grammatical focus derived from a structural syllabus.

Richards and Rogers (2014) and Richards (2015: 59) distinguish methods from approaches, the latter being more general and based on theories of what language is and how it should be learnt, while the former in addition are more specific on matters such as syllabus design and classroom procedures. However, we may still apply the above distinctions to different approaches. Prominent among them recently have been the Communicative and Natural approaches.

The **Natural Approach** (not the first use of the word 'natural' to apply to methodology) is also inductive and implicit, but is based on a model of language learning that is distinctly structural in nature (Krashen and Terrell 1983). Materials should be designed to expose learners to the next structure that the learners' 'acquisition devices' are ready for (as informed by SLA research).

Until now every method or approach that has been discussed has involved grammar in one way or other. But now we must confront approaches which have no place for grammar.

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Communicative Language Teaching (along with its close cousin, **task-based language teaching**) is one such approach which in its purest form has no place for grammar. It is based on a theory that we learn to speak by speaking. The target is communicative competence as opposed to linguistic competence; grammar is to be picked up along the way, without any focus on form. However, it has been pointed out that learners do not need to be taught to communicate since they can already do that in their L1s. Moreover, it cannot claim to be a fully ‘natural’ approach in the sense described above since it stresses production at the same time as reception (in L1 learning the latter always precedes the former). Another criticism has been that by forcing learners to communicate using whatever means they have at their disposal, they may end up with grammar that is fossilised: satisfactory for communication but full of errors; fluency at the expense of accuracy.

A realisation that the ‘strong’ version described above was rarely implemented in its entirety led some educators (e.g. Howatt 1984: 279) to distinguish a ‘weak’ version of the approach. In it the same communicative activities are used but they may be followed up with a reactive grammatical focus, especially if this is prompted by learners. Similarly, task-based language teaching may have a pre-task element, supplying learners with the linguistic resources needed to complete the task, or a post-task focus on formal problems encountered. However, this requires great skill and knowledge on the part of teachers; they have no control over what linguistic point might arise.

A more recent but less distinct trend may be termed the ‘**Awareness Approach**’. This has been influenced by developments in L1 education in the late twentieth century. In it a focus on grammatical features, along with a limited amount of terminology, is deemed useful, not only to achieve mastery of the code but also in order to understand the ideology ‘hidden’ behind certain grammatical features – for example, the use of the passive or nominalisation to conceal the agent of certain actions. Critical discourse analysis has had a role to play in this approach. Methodologically there are few guidelines, though obviously receptive skills dominate, and it is more suitable at an advanced level.

Of course, we must recognise that these methods and approaches are never slavishly followed as regards their standpoint on grammar; nor are they as distinct or mutually exclusive as their proponents suggest. Even in educational systems where the introduction of grammar is banned or frowned upon, it appears that teachers have continued to use grammar, particularly in the reactive manner. After all, how is a teacher to respond to a learner who asks a pertinent question about a grammatical problem they have encountered? Surely not by saying that it does not matter. Even Stephen Krashen, that most ardent supporter of natural approaches,

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allowed for the intrusion of grammar into the classroom for affective reasons, via his ‘affective filter’ – to satisfy learners (e.g. Krashen 1985).

However, there was a time in the 1980s when the experiential/natural trend dominated, at least in the writings and endorsements of experts, particularly as regards the communicative approach, while voices pointing out the drawbacks were hard to hear (for one exception see Marton 1988). Nowadays, however, in this post-communicative world, there seems to be less obsession with approaches and methods, and less debate about whether grammar should be included. Meanwhile, the attention of educators and researchers has passed to the role of teachers in the (grammar) teaching process: why do they teach grammar and how? The change in emphasis was noted by Mitchell (1994: 91):

There is now a substantial educational research tradition . . . which reminds us that teachers are by no means ‘implementation machines’, as far as innovatory methodological advice is concerned . . . As far as grammar is concerned, therefore, we need to know not only what is being said to teachers, but also what they are making of this advice at any particular time, if we are to understand better the role of grammar in classroom teaching and learning.

This research programme was taken up by, amongst others, Borg (1998, 2003), with findings suggesting the aspect that was most influential for teachers was their own learning experiences.

In the meantime, the grammatical syllabus has been alive and well in coursebooks, as will be seen in Section 6.2, though often combined with other organising principles, such as tasks, functions and situations, and pronunciation. One trend has been to have separate grammar courses, which may be used as adjuncts to skills courses, such as Murphy’s classic *English Grammar in Use* (various editions from 1985) and Swan and Walter’s *Oxford English Grammar Course* (2011).

But now we must turn our attention to the other endeavour which struck at the very root of the notion of grammatical involvement in teaching.

1.4 Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Studies and the Role of Formal Instruction

At the same time as educators were beginning to question the pedagogic value of grammar in language teaching, researchers in the 1970s were reaching similar conclusions from a different direction, from studies carried out into second language acquisition. Early findings regarding the acquisition of basic morphemes in English suggested that